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Empowering Our Ministry: How Unbelief Affects the Church

1 Corinthians 2:12-14

Thomas Michael Smith
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This morning I carry forward with the theme of unbelief. For those who were not present last week, I engaged head-on the notion that we live in a culture in which unbelief is a readily available option. Going back to Augustine, I demonstrated how unbelief wasn't a real option until the 19th century. But today we live with a worldview, a set of assumptions in which unbelief is just as likely as belief. Caught in a value-less maelstrom of factions competing for the attention of our young people, we are often without a firm foothold and thus unable to offer guidance, let alone support, to those who are lost.

And the power of God expressed through the Holy Spirit? Where is that power? Where is it expressed in a way that I can see? What person in our congregation has been healed? Who has brought forth a special Word from the Lord? Where are we stepping out in faith, trusting that God will supply our need? Unbelief is all around us, in us, a part of us.

Consider the twelve apostles. They were afforded the finest preparation for ministry ever experienced. They had communed with God incarnate for three years, benefiting from His constant instruction and observing innumerable displays of seemingly limitless power. Three of them were firsthand witnesses of His manifest glory at the Mount of Transfiguration. All of them had observed His crucifixion, and most importantly, His power over death in resurrection. If ever a person had been equipped for preaching the Gospel, these people were. No theological institution could ever hope to duplicate the privileges granted them. Yet Jesus knew that if left to themselves these privileged men would meet with nothing but failure and antagonism. Therefore, to meet the demands of a commission impossible to accomplish in human strength, He promised a source of power that would infinitely transcend human potency, the power of the Holy Spirit. They were told to wait, and they waited. And the power of God came upon them. And the 120 that gathered to be with the risen Christ expanded to 3,000 in a few days from the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was made available to them.

So, what's our excuse? What's our reason for not having 3,000 people here right now? Yeah, they wouldn't fit. They wouldn't fit the box we have built for God. And what does that say about us? I contend that the reason we don't have 3,000 here today is that we aren't taking God seriously. And the reason we don't take God seriously is because of the unbelief that is so very present in our culture, in who we are, in how we think about life.

William Bennett has written extensively about the values which are increasingly absent in our culture. His indicators show an entire culture that has abandoned the power of God, a culture that looks to the rational mind - a power that can't save it. For heavens sake, the 20th century was to be the century of human achievement, a period of prosperity and enlightenment. But some things never seem to change when the reliance is upon a rationalistic-based worldview. Because cultural and church leaders didn't believe in the demonic, demonic powers were free to roam where they wanted.

Kaiser Wilhelm II was convinced by an early advisor that he had access to vastly powerful spiritual forces that wanted Germany to conquer the world, and would provide the Kaiser the power to overcome all obstacles. At the end of WWI, Wilhelm retired to an estate in Holland and purchased a collection of occult books, trying to figure out why his faith in occult powers had so betrayed him.

We could talk of Hitler, or Stalin, or Mao, or Pol Pot, or Milosevich, or the dozens in between. The rational mind hasn't done so well. Yet, most Western churches have abandoned Augustine's basic faith in the power of God. And as they have done so, they have lost the power to minister to a culture sliding into depravity.

How has unbelief affect the church? There are a series of 'theological' questions which touch the larger church, questions which were never a part of the worldview held by all until well into the Enlightenment period. I'll put these questions into a form all of us can understand.

For instance, is God a personal divine being with whom we may be personally related, or is God a force? New Age mysticism and the 'theology of Star Wars' suggest that God isn't really 'there' in the sense of a person with whom you can converse. Do you believe that He is really and objectively 'there'?

Or the position of the Deists - that God took part in the creation of the world but then left town. Deists can say they believe in God but, in truth, they don't believe God is involved with people anymore. It's assent, not trust.

What's the source of morals? Are they given by God or merely the result of cultural conditioning? What of the nature of conscience? Is conscience from God or is it merely the internalized values of one's parents - or Freud's 'superego?'

How do you view the Bible? Is the Bible the product of divine revelation given through men and women or is it purely the result of cultural processes that God may have used? Are the predictive prophecies in the Old Testament actually prophetic predictions of future events, or are they the work of editors who shaped and reinterpreted the words of the prophets after the events took place?

The early church fathers believed that the virgin birth was of paramount importance to the faith. In fact, to defend this miracle, and the miracle of the incarnation, these early church leaders were willing to die, to be tortured and harassed by the Roman government for centuries. Yet, if you read William Barclays' commentaries, you will hear him say that the virgin birth is not a doctrine that our church compels us to accept in the literal and physical sense, that the virgin birth presents us with certain difficulties, and that we have full liberty to come to our own belief and our own conclusion. What exactly are the 'difficulties' to which Barclay refers? He doesn't mention them, but I know from his other writings that his worldview couldn't accept the possibility of God's miraculous intervention in human history.

Another question is, how do we understand the nature of the Christian life? Is it 'supernatural' living in relationship with a transcendent God? Or is it primarily doing what the rest of society concedes is the right and moral thing to do? Does God really guide, provide, teach, inspire, care, fight, judge, bless and answer prayer?

What is the true nature of the church? That is, do we understand CPC primarily in terms of programs, management

principles and group process, or in spiritual terms such as faith, sacraments, prayer, the Word of God, worship of the living God, and divine guidance?

Do we really believe Christ is coming again? Is this an actual possibility? Are the gifts of the Holy Spirit as listed in 1 Corinthians 12 actually possible today? Does the Devil actually exist as a personal objective reality opposed to God, or is he a concept or myth arising from an older pre-scientific age? Are evil spirits actual, personal entities that may afflict human beings, or are they merely psychological complexes that have to some degree become autonomous?

Each of these questions puts in stark relief the presuppositions with which we come to spiritual reality. And before you may deal with any of these questions adequately, you must first examine your own presuppositions. This isn't just an academic discussion. I don't care whether you've gone to college or not. Your presuppositions about reality affect the way you see everything.

Overall, this anti-supernatural bias that's consistent with Descartes' rationalistic worldview inevitably leads the church to three genuine problems:

The loss if spiritual power to impact the world in a manner that's consistent with the Gospel

It's painfully obvious that the mainline denominations in the Western world suffer from a major 'power shortage.' We have a multiplicity of programs, well-furnished buildings, and command vast resources, yet we are not growing and are finding ourselves unable to address seriously the evils plaguing modern society. That's because we are not availing ourselves of the primary equipment promised the Christian for witnessing to Jesus and doing the works that He did - prayer and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Our modern worldview has undercut the authority of Scripture, and has borne skepticism concerning the actual historical reality of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. Prayer, as well as the gifts of the Holy Spirit, have been relegated to the fringes in our churches. The result is a power failure that's blocking the advancement of the Gospel.

A hindrance to cross cultural missions

Another area where the Church's attachment to a Western worldview has had a far-reaching negative consequence is on the mission field. Missionaries bound by a Western worldview have made profound contributions to the humanization of the world through the introduction of modern medicine, science, and education, but there have been many missed opportunities for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in power in the context of native cultures.

There have been many cases where God had supernaturally prepared for the coming of Western missionaries, but because the missionaries came with a rationalistic or a Dispensational worldview, they missed what God was already doing.

A short example. A Presbyterian pastor was at a meeting of mission board leaders, A representative from a church in Africa with whom this denomination had extensive commitments was speaking. In his report, the African spoke exclusively of the political and economic challenges facing the church. During lunch, the pastor sat with the African representative and shared

with him his experiences of seeing the Gospel take root through signs and wonders and power encounters. The African became very excited and told the pastor that the same thing was happening in his nation - church growth had come because of the evident power of Jesus Christ in signs and wonders. But then he said, "I cannot tell the people here in your mission headquarters what is really happening, they just don't take seriously that sort of thing."

A loss of discernment in spiritual warfare

Whenever the church has adopted a rationalistic scientific worldview, the demonic forces that are allied against the church are not believed to be real, and so they are not clearly discerned. The result is that Christians are defenseless against the attacks and schemes of their chief adversary, the Devil.

In the 1920's and 1930's, the church in Germany was profoundly influenced by theologians with a Western rationalistic worldview. With a few notable exceptions, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, most German Christians failed to discern the demonic nature of Nazism. One of the creeds in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions is the Barmen Declaration, written in large part by these two men, who discerned more than varios economic and political and social reasons for the rise of the Nazi state.

So, what are we to do? Well, we need to expand our worldview to include the supernatural and the spiritual realms. It doesn't mean discarding our rationalism, but expanding our view to include realities that are trans-rational. And how do we do that? How do we expand our worldview? Next time. Stay tuned.

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